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Texts: Psalm 100; Acts 16: 25-34; Ephesians 5: 18b-19
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Our Lives Flow On in Endless Song

These past several weeks have been devoted to exploring who we are as Congregationalists, and how FCCOL came to be what it is. We've explored the wider history of the Reformation and of Congregationalism as a tradition. We've thought about how we emerged from both Luther and Calvin, but also from the Pilgrims and the Puritans in this country - something that I tried to argue brought some distinct gifts, even if many of us instinctively shy away from thinking of ourselves as "puritans." We've also explored the emphasis upon learning that has always been a part of the Reformed and the Congregational models of being the church. For those of us who have been around here for a while, I hope it's been a useful reminder of some features that make us distinctive. But it's also been a way of helping to orient, and to welcome, those who may be new to this place - and there are a good many of you out there, I know.

Today I'd like to extend these meditations on who we are by returning us to a practice that we experimented with a year ago: singing. We sing every week, of course, but throughout this sermon I'm going to ask for you to call out hymns that you would like to sing. And so while I say a few words now, be thinking about what hymn or hymns you might like to choose. There was enough energy when we did this a year ago that many of us gathered with one another at the home of one of our members last year for a hymn sing, and we had a great time together. We'll be doing that again on a Friday in June. So keep your eyes and ears open for the date.

For some of us, hymns may seem like one of the least cool things about coming to church. And I totally get that. Last year I told a story about how that all changed for me. It's a story that's worth sharing again. When I was a pastoral resident at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church nearly 25 years ago, I got wind of a group that got together for a potluck once a month, where they would first eat, and then sing hymns together. And I wanted to join them. These were not fundamentalists from some cultural backwater. There were professors from Penn and Villanova. There were some left leaning social workers and teachers. There were some others who just liked singing the old songs together. And there was my friend Jack, 80 some years old, the Clerk of the Session of that church, who would sip bourbon while he and his partner Helen sang from what they called "the Real Hymnal," one with words and phrases that dated from an earlier era. Bourbon fueled, they would proudly sing the older words loudly, with all the thees and thous intact, grinning the whole time. These were all engaged, broad minded folks in the greater Philadelphia community, and they found value in singing hymns together. And though I had grown up with these songs my whole life, and though I respected and valued them, gathering with those individuals in Philadelphia helped me to see what a gift these songs were. Some of them are a few decades old. But some of them date back for hundreds of years, and a few are a thousand or more years old. These are songs that have sustained people for generations, and it may be that they still have the power to sustain us.

Let's pause now to sing a few hymns. We'll sing two verses of each one. And we'll sing maybe three or so selections. Now, I have but one rule: we'll sing anything in the hymnal, but for my part, I do not wish to sing Onward Christian Soldiers. That's a hymn that has been right

for certain times and places, including during the Civil Rights Movement, but I'm not sure it's right for this time or place. Having said that, let's get this going.

(Three Hymns)

Singing together has been a part of our faith tradition from the beginning. The Psalms are a collection of ancient poetry, but they were all meant to be sung communally. It's as though we have a kind of ancient hymnal included in the very center of our Bibles, even if the musical variations have been lost. We know that Jesus and his small community of friends sang those songs together. On the terrible night in which he was betrayed and arrested, we're told that before leaving that upper room and facing into what was coming, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn together. "And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night, when utmost evil strove against the light," we sing in one of our own modern hymns. It's been one of the ways that people of faith have pushed back against despair, suffering and hopelessness from the very beginnings of the Christian story.

That was true of Paul and Silas, singing hymns together in prison midway through the book of Acts. It was true of the Civil Rights Movement in this country, and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, something we've spoken about often. It was also true of the Labor Movement in the early part of the 20th century.

But that model of singing was also used during a much earlier protest movement that shook the world.[1] I'm referring, of course, to the Protestant Reformation. When Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517, there was no congregational singing at all within the Catholic Church. Priests recited the Mass in Latin, a language that ordinary people did not understand. And choral music was sung by paid singers, but those same ordinary people were themselves expected to remain quiet, both in church and before all significant authority. Luther's inclusion of congregational singing into his reforms was, in essence, a move toward greater democracy, toward greater inclusion, not wholly unlike the way songs and hymns were used during the Civil Rights era. It was Luther who, in 1524, helped to publish what amounts to the first hymnal in his attempts to institute those democratic reforms known as Protestantism. From the start, then, protest and reform, at least in our tradition, took place accompanied by singing.

And then John Calvin too insisted on congregational singing in his reform movements a few decades after Luther. Forced to endure trials, and then exile, Calvin made it a practice to include the singing of the Psalms in all worship services. In fact, when the city of Geneva invited him back after years in exile, a condition of his return was that congregational singing be included in all worship services. This too was a kind of gesture toward what would become democracy. Calvin also created a kind of hymnal, known as the Geneva Psalter, first published in 1539. That is among the reasons that Protestants, and more particularly, those who became Congregationalists, have had a robust tradition of singing together throughout their history. At the front of our own hymnal, for example, we read that just prior to setting sail for the New World in 1620, the Pilgrims sang a hymn together. Like Jesus and the apostles, just like Paul and

[1] Some of the details that follow can be found in the article "Luther, Calvin, and the Recovery of Congregational Singing," by Robert P. Mills. Published in the journal *Theology Matters*, August 2018. https://www.theologymatters.com/articles/church-and-culture/2018/luther-calvin-and-the-recovery-of-congregational-singing-is-the-reformers-legacy-at-risk/

Silas, just like the first Protestant reformers, and just like the Civil Rights movement many years later, when faced with trials and struggles, the Pilgrims knew to sing.

Singing hymns together is a small "d" democratic act, one that we do well to remember, and practice anew in an era when democracy is under assault. We must not forget the power of this practice, and its legacy within our wider faith tradition.

(3 Hymns)

We're singing together on Mother's Day, of course. What are we to do with the fact that, from the moment of birth, many - not all, but many - mothers sing to their babies? Fathers do it too, but it's often mothers who do it earliest and best. What does it mean that, for many people, their earliest experiences of the world involve being sung to? And what does it mean that, when confronted with the vulnerability of an infant, a mother's first instinct is to sing, to envelop the child in melodies?

I tend to think that it's a sign that songs work as a kind of primal blessing, and that to surround a young child in song is somehow to access an archaic part of ourselves that blesses and protects through song. That's been true of many of the ritual cultures I have known and experienced. Some of us have experienced it among the Black Masking Indians of New Orleans, and quite recently among rural communities in Cuba practicing Santeria and Vodou. These are traditions that bless and protect through song. But we do it too, at the end of every service. The choir sings a blessing down upon us as we go out in the world. I think it is this deep human instinct, to use singing to provide blessing and protection, that gets stirred when a mother holds a child, and sings.

And so perhaps when we sing together, including when we sing hymns, it's a kind of unconscious reminder of those moments when we were sung to, held and enfolded by the sound of a mother's voice. Perhaps singing together somehow reminds us of those first primal feelings of love. Perhaps it hearkens back to the love of God, which we believe surrounds us from birth.

But it's also true when we die. I come from a singing family, of Pennsylvania Dutch farming folk who sang together at every meal. Several years ago, prior to the moment that my great aunt - my grandmother's sister - died out in California, some thirty members of her family were huddled around her in a hospital room. I heard their pastor say that as he approached the room from far down the hallway, he could hear them all singing hymns together, in four part harmony, to deliver her into the arms of God.

I've said in the past that when my time comes, I hope someone will read to me. But I also hope there will be those among my loved ones who still remember some hymns, and who will gather around to sing them.

Let's sing a few more together now.

(3 Hymns)

Let me conclude with a kind of parable: not long ago I heard a story on the Moth Radio Hour about communal singing.[2] A woman was on a crowded subway somewhere in the outer boroughs of New York when a man got on, intent on disturbing the other riders. He began to preach at them, to denounce them, and then he launched into a string of racist and homophobic

[2] "Strangers on a Train," as told by Onnesha Roychoudhuri on the Moth Radio Hour. First aired in April 2021. https://themoth.org/stories/strangers-on-a-train

judgments that he claimed came from the Bible. Everyone on the train was visibly uncomfortable, but they chose not to make eye contact, in hopes that the agitator would get off at the next stop, or go to the next car. He stayed on, for longer and longer, talking louder and louder, becoming more rude and offensive as they went. The teller of the story, a shy and reserved woman, felt something inexplicable rising within her, and then, surprising even herself, she blurted out, "Sir, if you don't stop talking right now, I'm going to sing." Well, the angry man continued his rant, and so, almost inaudibly at first, the woman started singing the only song she could think of in that moment, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." And it was awkward and off key, and she was just sort of out there, all on her own. It had no effect on the man spouting those epithets. But then she noticed a little kid in a stroller, and the kid had keyed in on the song, and he started singing along, and his parents joined in too. And then another guy at the far end of the train took off his Beats headphones, and he joined in, and before long the whole car began singing. And for a while, the hateful guy tried to keep up, matching his volume with theirs. That's when the teller of the tale, our singer, got everyone to sing the song in rounds, until finally, finally, the man just shut up, and got off the train. It was a moment in which hatred was overcome not through arguments, not through angry denunciations, but through the joyful power of communal singing.

It's not always like that, of course. Sometimes hatred and injustice requires direct confrontation. But there are other times, when whatever tangled currents of bitterness are coursing among us can be undone with something as simple as communal singing.

And maybe it can be like that for us, with hymns. Because right now, it's as though in our society we're all riding on a rather large train right now, and people have gotten on the train mouthing the most hateful things. And yes, there are things we need to do right now to prevent them from doing more harm than they already have. But it may be that one of the best things we can do is to continue this radical, spiritual and democratic practice of singing together. Singing the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that the writer to the Ephesians enjoins his readers to sing. Singing any communal songs that come to mind, including children's songs. And singing the songs collected in our hymnals, this record of our communal faith together. Let's sing together, one more time.

(Closing Hymn - Siyahamba)